The Independent Scholar Vol. 10 (December 2023) ISSN 2381-2400

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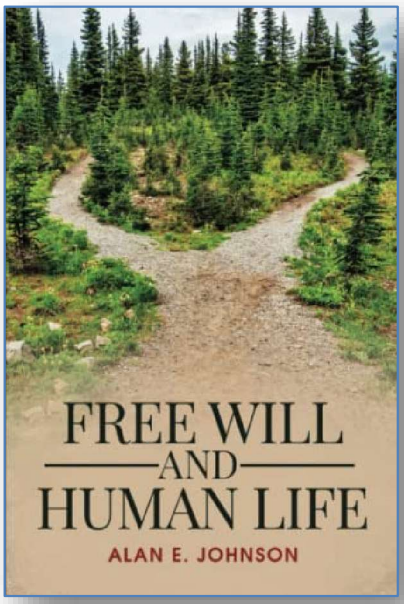

Free Will and Human Life

Alan E. Johnson

Philosophia Publications (28 July 2021)

Paperback: 160 pages
ISBN-10 : 0970105533
ISBN-13 : 978-0970105530

Free Will and Human Life: Amazon.co.uk: Johnson, Alan E.: 9780970105530: Books

Review by Gary Herstein, first published online 24 July 2023.

This book attempts to address a predicament the author found himself in, how to teach Ethics without first establishing a baseline of knowledge regarding arguments for or against the reality of free will. Many an excellent book has emerged from just this kind of predicament, and this tidy little volume can now be added to that list. Full disclosure before going on: I was already predisposed to agree with the author's argument before encountering this book, and I make no pretense of adopting a mythological position of "pure objectivity." One of the things I like about the book is that the author is the same way: honest up front about his inclinations, and still willing to present the best arguments he can find against his position, and then confronting those arguments with solid reasons.

A note here on reviewer's license: The book really did excite me a bit, so I will use this opportunity to occasionally wander off on tangents that I find especially interesting, but which were in turn inspired by reading Johnson's volume. This is not purely "look-at-me-ism." Rather I want to argue by demonstration that this is one of the better ways of reading this monograph.

The book is short – a little over 150 pages, including the index. But its goal is highly focused, and hence greater exposition would not only fail to serve, it would get in the way. As mentioned above, the purpose of this volume was originally to act as an auxiliary on the topic of free will so as to provide students in Ethics classes a leg up on the implicit assumptions guiding many of the arguments in that (nominally) primary topic. But what began as an auxiliary has emerged as a stand-alone introduction to a complex and important philosophical topic. In addition, this *is* an introduction, and not an in depth exposition directed at experts in the discipline; it is more a 'field guide,' if you will, for those who want to touch on the subject at enough detail to get a sense of the issues, one which then provides sufficient

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directions for those who wish to explore further on some of the ways they might choose to proceed.

There are three main chapters to the book, plus an introduction where the main problem and central definitions and concepts are presented. Of these latter, the most important is the definition of free will:

> "Free will" is the independent ability to make conscious decisions that are neither predetermined nor random. [FW, 3][451]

Johnson then sets out clarifying how each of the key terms – specifically, "independent," "conscious," and "predetermined" – are to be understood. This is a solid methodology; philosophy should never read like a mystery or a thriller, with a surprise reveal at the end. One thing I would add here, were I teaching from this book, is that definitions should not be treated as rigid, chiseled in stone, *ex cathedra* declarations of "The Law." Rather, they should be viewed as heuristic guidelines to inform and direct *inquiry*, not as finalities in their own right, but as important stepping stones in an ongoing process. This is not a criticism of the book which, as already noted, by its own declared heuristic principles is kept as brief as possible. Rather, it is a reflection of my own philosophy and pedagogical principles which, for example, John Dewey would argue are essentially the same thing.[452] It is, I would argue, a strength of this monograph that it allows of that kind of interpolation of style and interpretation. In addition, Johnson himself later reminds the reader, "not to fall into the semantic trap of thinking that all definitions of free will are the same" [FW 42].

The three main chapters present arguments against free will (chapter one), arguments for the reality of free will (chapter two), and the author's own position (chapter three), which is in many ways an extension and refinement of chapter two.

The three major branches of thought that deny the reality of free will are, as Johnson notes, religious, philosophical, and scientific. This is also a temporal order, within the western tradition, and is suggestive that, in a sense, each later argument emerges from the former. It is not quite that simple, as Johnson's discussion shows. But, again, as important as the answers suggested are the questions invited.

Right here, I would once again a philosophical observation of my own. Philosophical analyses tend to emphasize, and take their clues from, one of two ways of approaching matters: by emphasizing existence, or by emphasizing experience. Among my own thoughts and questions, invited by FW, it seems that the tendency to deny the reality of free will is most common among those strands that emphasize existence, while those who advocate for its reality are most likely to start with experience. Keep in mind here that experience is our only access to existence. So when those who emphasize existence say things that deny the reality of experience, or some significant part thereof, there are defensible reasons for challenging the presuppositions of such challenges.

Argument in the western tradition against the reality of free will all seem to begin with the Christian legacy; I, at least, am aware of no such arguments in either the ancient Greeks, nor in the Hebrew traditions. Johnson highlights Paul's letter to the Romans as an originating point for the reality of a predetermined "elect" [FW 7], and then turns to examine in detail the enduring contributions of Augustine [FW 8, ff]. Several other religious figures are considered, but always it comes back to the same thing: an omniscient, omnipotent God is in control of, and has preordained all that occurs. This is not a very satisfying argument for anyone who sets their highest stakes upon rational justification.[453] But it sets the stage for the idea that human choice is of no particular relevance in either the grand or the lesser scheme of things, a truly novel idea

[451] I will use intext notes, abbreviating the book as "FW" throughout. One caveat about pagination, I am working from the Kindle edition, and experience suggests that the page numbers as listed are a little more approximate than with an actual piece of dead tree in one's hands.

[452] See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916.

[453] It is, in fact, a form of what is known as "fideism," in which reason is more or less explicitly rejected in favor of pure faith and belief.

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within the western canon.

Philosophical positions all emerge directly from the religious ones, but they begin to redirect the emphasis. Thus (quoting Leo Strauss) Johnson notes in agreement that,

> Hobbes' personal attitude toward positive religion was at all times the same: religion must serve the State [FW 12].

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) position, bridging the English civil war (1642–1646) and the Restoration (1660) make him an especially important figure in the philosophical shift from purely religious arguments, and those rooted in more secular views of the world, and so Johnson devotes several pages to his arguments.

The segue into science technically begins with Newton, but is brought forcefully into public discussion by Pierre Laplace a century later. The story goes that, when Napoleon asked Laplace why he included no mention of "God" in his works, Laplace replied, "I had no need of that hypothesis."[454] Laplace's commitment to the secular and the mathematical was absolute, and the result was was his argument for absolute, mechanical determinism: a sufficiently great intelligence could, by knowing the exact state of the universe at any moment in the past, calculate the exact state of the universe at any point in the future [FW 18 – 19].

One of the more prominent agents in the argument against free will is the contemporary British philosopher Ted Honderich. Professor Honderich is quite well known among academic philosophers, and is an important contributor to these debates, and thus a good terminal point for Johnson's discussion. Honderich takes the case for a fairly strong form of universal determinism, the questions of randomness brought up by quantum physics being treated as not especially important. (As Johnson observes, and his own definition of free will stipulates, randomness does not open the door for free will, since it eliminates any reasoned connection with choice as certainly as does absolute determinism.)[455] Prior to going deeper into the details of Honderich's argument, Johnson makes the following, and I would argue crucial, observation:

> As with so many (pre)determinist opponents of free will, (Honderich) attempts to place the burden of proof on the advocates of free will, notwithstanding the fact that a belief in some kind of free will is consistent with human experience whereas a belief in (pre)determinism with regard to human choices and decisions is counter-intuitive. [FW 20]

This, again, brings us up against the distinction I broached earlier for those whose arguments are biased (in some manner) toward existence, versus those whose arguments begin with experience. As stated, I am overwhelmingly inclined to the latter position and am, as the saying goes, prepared to "die on that hill." I don't believe a coherent case can be made for the contrary, and hence Johnson's clear statement of the issue above and throughout is one of the parts of this book that I wish to emphasize.

Other thinkers, some of them neuroscientists presenting empirical results – and their *interpretations* of those results – are then discussed, but the flavor of the argument against can already be seen in all of them. These arguments generally follow, and suffer from, one of two patterns "The old-fashioned determinism involved predeterminism and inevitability. The new determinism is ad hoc" [FW 39].

Even though I've only skimmed through little more than the first 25% of the book, this seems like a good point to tie things up. The arguments in favor of free will are every bit as careful and well distributed across the philosophical spectrum. Hopefully the above suffices to indicate not only the care with which Johnson develops his argument, not only its direction (which is quite explicit), but also some sense of the potential avenues that readers can explore and develop on their own.

The great American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce

[454] This incident is not mentioned in the book, but it is so famous and iconic that I thought it worth mentioning here.

[455] I might add that Ernst Cassirer made this observation in his *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics*, Yale University Press, 1956.

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argued that the worst, most singular vice in any intellectual activity is to close off the road of inquiry. So, in contrast, the greatest cardinal virtue is to point to doors opening upon that road that one had not seen before. Johnson's book is one that invites the reader to investigate further.

Gary Herstein *spent 25 years in the computer and networked PC industries, and after obtaining graduate degrees taught full-time and part time at various colleges. He is currently working on various projects relating to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, the logical forms and presuppostions of measurement, and the connections between spatial reasoning and metaphysics. His publications include* The Quantum of Explanation *(with Randall Auxier), Routledge Studies in American Thought, (2017),* Whitehead and the Measurement Problem of Cosmology, *through ontos-verlag (May 2006), "Alfred North Whitehead" (The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/w/whitehed.htm) and "Davidson and the Impossibility of Psychophysical Laws" (Synthese 145 1, 2005). He presently keeps house with his two cats, who despair of him ever learning anything interesting.*